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## X.—THE USURER IN ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

Jeremy Bentham in his iconoclastic *Defence of Usury* offers this plausible if somewhat cynical explanation of the well-nigh universal unpopularity of the money lender: "Those who have the resolution to sacrifice the present to the future, are natural objects of envy to those who have sacrificed the future to the present. The children who have eaten their cake, are the natural enemies of the children who have theirs."<sup>1</sup> And similarly he explains the unhappy rôle that is almost as universally meted out to the money lender of drama. "It is the business of the dramatist," he says, "to study and to conform to, the humors and passions of those on the pleasing of whom he depends for his success. . . . Now I question whether, among all the instances in which a borrower and a lender of money have been brought together upon the stage, from the days of Thespis to the present, there ever was one, in which the former was not recommended to favour in some shape or other—either to admiration, or to love, or to pity, or to all three;—and the other, the man of thrift, consigned to infamy."<sup>2</sup>

However loath one may be to accept this theory of "the business of the dramatist," one has to confess that his practice often seems to be what is here stated; and there is no getting away from the fact that Bentham has described the typical treatment accorded both the money lender and the money borrower of drama, certainly of the English drama at its greatest period. Indeed, a reading of the more than

<sup>1</sup> *Defence of Usury*. Letter x, John Bowring's edition of Bentham's *Works*, vol. III, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

sixty plays<sup>3</sup> in which these characters appear, written during the ninety years following 1553, reveals an analogous similarity of the very devices used by the dramatists to bring about the desired conclusion. Further, by reading the plays in approximately chronological order, it is even possible to trace an apparent evolution of these devices from a crude and literal *deus ex machina* in the morality plays to two very popular *deae ex machina* who flourished in numerous amusing and highly complicated comedies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean heyday. It is also possible, thus, to come to a new realization may be, not so much of the unabashed persistency with which Elizabethan dramatists, great and small, "went and took" characters, situations, and whole plots from one another, as of the resourceful ingenuity with which they altered and varied their borrowings.

The source of the rather surprisingly ubiquitous usurer of English drama is far from certain. William Poel, in his *Shakespeare in the Theatre*, of 1913, says, "Now if we go back to the Latin comedies and consider the origin of the money lenders, we find a type of character similar to that of Shylock. Molière's Harpagon who is modelled on the miser of Plautus, has a strong resemblance to Barabas and Shylock."<sup>4</sup> But the money lender and the miser are very different personages in Latin comedy. The typical Plautine money lender, for example, is not miserly; and, though the typical usurer of Elizabethan drama is, it does not seem likely that he is an exotic compound of these two

<sup>3</sup> Forty-five of the seventy-one plays that I have found containing or seeming to contain usurers are mentioned or described in one connection or another in this paper. In the remaining twenty-six, either the usurer is an unimportant character or his usuriousness is incidental or even doubtful.

<sup>4</sup>Page 75.

quite distinct characters. In the few cases where they were certainly transplanted, their differences were maintained. The miser, Jacques, of Jonson's *The Case is Altered*, far from lending his money even at usurious rates, hides it, as does his Plautine prototype, Euclio, of the *Aulularia*.<sup>5</sup> And the usurer, in Heywood's *The English Traveler*, who is even to his language, a translation of the Banker in the *Mostellaria*,<sup>6</sup> and who may be taken as a fair representation of the typical Plautine money lender, is unlike his English brethren in being portrayed as not miserly at all, or as in other ways objectionable. Indeed, neither the Plautine miser nor the Plautine money lender is markedly similar to the Elizabethan stage usurer in the latter's almost distinguishing characteristics: his villainy, his cruelty, his loathsomeness, and the contempt and hatred with which he is regarded. In these respects, the Plautine procurer comes much closer; and it is possibly significant that these rôles are actually combined in Security in *Eastward Hoe*. However, no one of these three characters in Roman comedy ever appears in a plot strongly suggestive of those which soon came to be the almost invariable vehicles in which the Elizabethan usurers ran their ignominious careers. Certainly, there seems to be no tangible basis for Poel's assertion that in *The Merchant of Venice*, "Shakespeare thrusts the conventional usurer of the old Latin comedy into a play of love and chance."<sup>7</sup>

After finding that many Elizabethan descriptions of the physical appearance, the dress, and the personal habits of the usurer were modelled closely on mediæval descrip-

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the indebtedness, see Cunningham's edition of Gifford's *The Works of Ben Jonson*, 1875, vol. VI, pp. 328, 345, 350.

<sup>6</sup> See Reinhardtstoettner's *Plautus*, especially pp. 469-474.

<sup>7</sup> *L. c.*, p. 70.

tions of Avarice,<sup>8</sup> particularly upon realizing the close spiritual affinity between the two, I was led to look to the Avaritia who appears so often in the morality plays as the prototype of the usurer of the later drama. And here it is possible to trace a line of descent, but a line so faint and uncertain that it can be suggested as only a not improbable hypothesis. Dr. Walter Reinicke, whose treatise I did not come across until after I had completed my researches, says that out of the old morality drama, "Eine Menge typischer Gestalten treten uns entgegen, und unter ihnen befindet sich auch der Wucherer."<sup>9</sup> He, however, gives no example except the Usurer in Lodge and Greene's *A Looking-Glass for London and England* to support his statement, and he does not suggest an evolution from Avarice, or any other similar character of the moralities, to this relatively late dramatic usurer.

In the political-morality play, *Respublica*, of 1553, there is an Avarice who has filled one of his thirteen purses with the "intresse of thys yeares userie."<sup>10</sup> And Greed-inesse, in George Wapull's *The Tide Tarrieth No Man*, written probably much earlier than 1576, the date of the earliest extant edition, is unmistakably and aggressively a usurer. Moreover, several other characters of this old play were to appear in most of the subsequent usurer plays, the prodigal, here a courtier, his evil associates, symbolized in Corage, "the Vice," and the broker, appropriately

<sup>8</sup> Compare, for example, Lodge's *Wits Miserie*, pp. 27, 28, Hunterian Club edition, and *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, Skeat's edition, vol. 1, B Text, Passus v, p. 146, ll. 190-199, and *The Romaunt of the Rose*, ll. 207-246. These partial parallels were brought to my attention in Professor E. D. McDonald's *An Example of Plagiarism among Elizabethan Pamphleteers*, Indiana University Studies, vol. ix, no. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Der Wucherer im älteren englischen Drama*. Halle Dissertation, 1907, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Act III, sc. vi.

named Hurtfull-Helpe. And the usurer himself has most of the disagreeable traits of his successors and like them comes to a miserable end, though whether by "a greater fit" or "the new sicknesse" is not entirely clear. There is not in the play, however, any hint of the characteristic devices by which the overthrow of the usurer was later to be accomplished.

Nor were such devices employed in the next three plays, all belated moralities, in which usurers appear and come to richly merited confusion, Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London*, 1583, its sequel, *The Three Lords and Ladies of London*, written between 1585 and 1588, and Lodge and Greene's *A Looking Glass for London and England*, of 1589.<sup>11</sup> In the first two, in company with Simony, Fraud, and Dissimulation, appears Usury, who has come from Venice to serve Lady Lucre. After a series of ingeniously symbolic acts, such as undoing Plain-Dealing, cutting the throat of Hospitality, attempting to slay Liberality, and "covering Conscience with Fraud's cloak very cunningly," he is arrested and branded with "a little x standing in the midst of a great C—to let men understand, That you must not take above ten pound in the hundred at any hand."<sup>12</sup> The Usurer in *A Looking Glass* is less of an allegorical abstraction than the Usury of the Wilson plays, as his name possibly would indicate. Instead of undoing Plain-Dealing and Conscience, he ruins Thrasybulus, a young gentleman, and Alcon, a poor peasant. And he also comes to a more theatric though scarcely as probable an end by

<sup>11</sup> Unless the main outlines of it have been preserved in *The Merchant of Venice*, we can know nothing of the nature of *The Jew*, which was being acted at The Bull in 1579, beyond Stephen Gosson's description of it as "representing the greediness of worldly choosers, and the bloody minds of usurers" (*School of Abuse*, Shakespeare Society edition, p. 29).

<sup>12</sup> Dodsley's *Old Plays*, Hazlitt's edition, vol. vi, p. 381.

appearing in the last act to return his ill-gotten gains with a halter in one hand and a dagger in the other, "groaning in conscience" because he believes he is "stumbling" over the "bleeding ghosts" of his many victims.

Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, of 1589-1590, is the play that most clearly marks the transition from the old to the new dramatic portrayals of incarnate avarice. For one thing, the incarnation has at last gained a man's name. From Avarice, through Greediness, Usury, and a Usurer, Barabas has finally emerged, and Shylock is soon to come. In addition, Barabas is more than personified avarice, even if he does seem less a person than the complex and human Shylock. There is, nevertheless, in the play the intense seriousness and much of the didactic purpose and method of the earlier writers; though here again the *Jew of Malta* points forward as well as back. Several of the merriest of the later usurer comedies, such as Jonson's and Middleton's, retain something of both the earnestness and didactic intent of the morality play, and such creatures as Dekker's Barterville, in *If it be not Good, the Devil is in it*, Massinger's *Overreach*, and Pertenax, of Francis Quarles's *The Virgin Widow*, have much in common with Barabas, the Usurer of Lodge and Greene's creating, and the still earlier Greediness, not only in the lesson and in the frightfulness of their final taking off, but in their abstractness as well. In fact the names, Barterville and Overreach, show that allusive and symbolic names did not die out with Marlowe; Sir Moth Interest, Mamon, Lucre, Hoard, Scrape, Gripe, Bloodhound, Hog, and Vermine were all to follow. Marlowe's most fruitful contribution, however, at least to the development of the plot of the usurer play, was the introduction of a rebellious daughter, a heroine who later was to become almost a *dea ex machina* both in the overthrow of her

usurious father, the villain, and the salvation of her prodigal lover, the hero.

Even this, which soon came to be a frankly comic plot, was nevertheless related to one of the oldest and most persistent of all the themes of the morality drama, the story and the lesson of the prodigal son.<sup>13</sup> A usurer is often the means by which a prodigal comes to his downfall and reformation. The witty Thomas Nashe read this interpretation into the original version of the story itself: "The Prodigall-child in the Gospell is reported to have fedde Hogges, that is, Usurers, by letting them beguile hym of his substance."<sup>14</sup> And that the dramatists who made the most grossly comic utilization of this theme, even at a late date, were not unaware of the sacred source is possibly indicated by a passage in Shirley's *The Constant Maid*, of 1636 to 1639. A usurer there warns a friend not to have "either in arras or in picture the story of the prodigal" lest it frighten young gentlemen from spending their portions.<sup>15</sup> The prodigal-usurer play bears close resemblance to the Biblical story in another detail than the one suggested by Nashe, the often scandalous "happy ending." It must be noted, however, that the fatted calf in the Bible story is not killed until after the prodigal repents and returns, while in the drama the reward usually precedes the reformation. In fact, *Timon of Athens* is almost unique among the plays in which the usurer and the prodigal appear, in that Timon pays the just penalty of his foolish extravagance.

The typical and excellent comic situation in the prodigal-usurer play is this: A young spendthrift, who has

<sup>13</sup> See Professor Schelling's *Elizabethan Drama*, vol. I, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> *Christs Teares Over Jerusalem*, R. B. McKerrow's edition of Nashe's *Works*, vol. II, p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> Act I, sc. i.



become heavily indebted, or has actually lost his property, to a usurer, comes into his own, or the other's, property by eloping with the usurer's daughter and by carrying off anything else of value he or his mistress can lay hands on, money, jewels, or the mortgage itself. A somewhat similar though really distinct and later device for undoing the usurer, either bachelor or widower, and rescuing the hero was the introduction of an heiress whose hand both should seek, but of course the prodigal should eventually win. There is practically no end to the dexterous changes that were wrought in these two basic groupings of characters and events. It is not, however, the present purpose to point out the ways in which most of the sixty and more dramas conformed to these protean plots, nor, indeed, to enumerate all the permutations and combinations that resulted from them. It may suffice merely to show some of the more important developments in the growth of the two main plots and to describe some of the later plays that illustrate the clever uses and changes of the stock situations and characters that came to be the stage usurer's almost inseparable accessories.

Marlowe's contribution to the first of the plots just described, the introduction of a rebellious daughter, was slight. Abigail in *The Jew of Malta* does not elope with one of her father's debtors or with a young prodigal; in fact, she enters a monastery. And her rebelliousness is only indirectly if at all responsible for her father's final overthrow. But in *The Merchant of Venice*, four years later,<sup>16</sup> the rebellious daughter goes farther. She does elope and she carries with her a part of her father's treas-

<sup>16</sup> There are no contributions to the usurer plot or to the portrayal of the usurer in two plays of 1592, *A Knack to Know a Knave*, and *Nobody and Somebody*, in both of which appear characters who are, quite incidentally, usurers.

ure, and, though she does not bring about her father's downfall, she and her lover are connected with the group who do. And, again, though Jessica does not elope with her father's debtor, nor, apparently, with a prodigal,<sup>17</sup> both a debtor and a prodigal are in the play. The latter, moreover, retrieves his fortune and that of his friend by marrying an heiress. If Bassanio had borrowed from Shylock, had eloped with Jessica, and had, in addition to money and jewels, carried off possibly the bond also, the first type of the usurer-prodigal plot would have been evolved as early as 1594 or 1595. And the elements at least of the other were inherent in this play; Shylock might have been one of the unsuccessful suitors for the hand and inheritance of Portia.

In *A Knack to Know an Honest Man*, first acted in 1594, a rebellious daughter once more appears to thwart the plans of a usurious father. She does not elope with a prodigal debtor, but she releases two prisoners from her father's house, whose capture and confinement were apparently expected to yield profit. Eventually she marries one of these young men, and thus makes an appreciable advance toward the completion of the earlier of the two chief usurer-prodigal plots.

Further advances were made in *Wily Beguiled*, written "not long after 1596."<sup>18</sup> The daughter of the merciless usurer, Gripe, elopes, this time with a poor scholar, Sophos. He is not one of Gripe's debtors, and so the final step in the development of the most frequent later plot is yet to be taken, but there are several innovations in this play that were to be widely imitated in succeeding usurer plays. For the first time, the "gull" appears as the suitor favored

<sup>17</sup> Note, however, Lorenzo's description of himself as "an unthrift love" (v, i, 21).

<sup>18</sup> Malone Society Reprint, p. vii.

by the father, here in the person of Peter Plodall, son of a rich and conscienceless extortioner and landlord, a kind of second usurer. Another innovation, followed at least twice, is the introduction of a usurer's worthy and humane son, as if in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy, frequently in the mouths of Elizabethan preachers and reformers, "He that by usury and unjust gain increaseth his substance, he shall gather it for him that will pity the poor."<sup>19</sup> More often this son is a dupe, comparable to Peter, or a profligate who would be as sore a thorn in the usurer's flesh as a generous son. Another means of undoing the villain, an accomplice who turns traitor, though reminiscent of Ithamore in *The Jew of Malta*, may fairly be regarded as a further innovation made by *Wily Beguiled*, especially because the accomplice is here a rascally lawyer and because he is woven more closely into the plot by being made another discomfited wooer of the heroine. Moreover, false magic is, for the first time I believe, introduced. In this play Robin Goodfellow appears as a devil, to embarrass the elopement of hero and heroine, but he is, needless to say, unsuccessful. Later and successful utilizations of false magic were for the purpose of undoing or converting the usurer. The feature of *Wily Beguiled* that is used most frequently in later usurer plays, however, is the final repentance of the usurer and his reconciliation to the enforced son-in-law and the erring daughter.

In the next usurer play of which I have knowledge, William Haughton's *Englishmen for my Money*, of 1597-1598, the rebellious daughter *motif* has reached its full development. In fact, the situation has been so cleverly complicated that one is compelled to wonder if some simpler form had not intervened, or if some foreign model had not

<sup>19</sup> *Proverbs*, xxviii, 8.

been utilized.<sup>20</sup> Pisaro, the usurer, has *three* daughters whom he plans to marry to three rich foreign merchants. The daughters are in love with as many young English prodigals who have "pawned . . . their livings and their lands" <sup>21</sup> to Pisaro. The action of the play—and there is a plenty—consists in devices for outwitting the father and the three foreign dupes by the elopement of the daughters with the three English debtors. At the end, as in *Wily Beguiled*, the usuring father repents, accepts his unwelcome sons-in-law, and restores their property to them.

If Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the Exchange*,

<sup>20</sup> So far as I can discover, no source has been found for any one of these plays, or at least for the portions of them that would thus seem to reveal a natural evolution of the rebellious daughter device. What Marlowe may have called upon beyond his own fertile imagination is not known. Curiously, the Jessica-Lorenzo episode is not a part of the Italian novel, *Il Pecorone*, usually regarded as the ultimate source of *The Merchant of Venice*; and, though a fairly close analogue of the episode has been pointed out in Massuccio di Salerno's *Fourteenth Tale*—page 319 of the New Variorum edition of *The Merchant of Venice*—there is no other evidence that Shakespeare was familiar with the work of that author. The editor of the Malone Society reprint of *A Knack to Know an Honest Man* thinks that the name of one of the characters "suggests the possibility of an Italian source" (p. xi); and the editor of the same Society's reprint of *Wily Beguiled* does no more than point out certain obvious imitations of *The Merchant of Venice*. Dr. Albert C. Baugh, of the University of Pennsylvania, after a most painstaking search, is unable to find a source of the main plot of *Englishmen for My Money*. The "possibility of an Italian source" of any or all of these plays is strong, but thus far I have found none, nor have the several scholars, intimately familiar with the Italian literature of the period, to whom Dr. Baugh and I have appealed. Of course the prodigal, and the rebellious daughter, especially the daughter who refuses to marry the man of parental choice, are old and persistent characters in literature. It may not be too much to credit the slight if dexterous modifications of their rôles to meet the exigencies of the usurer play to a combination of English inventiveness and eclecticism.

<sup>21</sup> Act I, sc. i.

probably written in 1602, or, still better, Robert Tailor's *The Hog Hath Lost His Pearl*, of 1613, had only preceded Haughton's comedy, it would have been possible to show an entirely regular evolution of the rôle of the rebellious daughter in the usurer play from the first uncertain step in *The Jew of Malta* to the delightful complexity of *Englishmen for My Money*. Moll, a character in the subplot of Heywood's play, and daughter of the usurer, Berry, marries Bernard, in debt to her father and frowned upon by him. At the end Berry relents, receives the profligate son-in-law, and returns to him his mortgage. In Tailor's play, the hero, Haddit, a young prodigal whose land is also mortgaged to a usurer, Hog, also carries off the daughter and some of the usurer's money as well, and is likewise pardoned and accepted by the eventually reformed Hog. Here there is false magic in the form of "spirits" conjured up to aid in the elopement and the robbery. One of the last of the usurer plays to appear before the closing of the theatres, Richard Brome's *The Damselle, or the New Ordinary*, written in 1637 or 1638, makes use of the same general plot and group of characters. Vermine, a late and loathsome descendant of Avarice, has ruined by egregious usury, one Brokeall. After many complications, Brokeall's son marries the usurer's run-away daughter, gains his father-in-law's reluctant blessing, and regains his father's property as dowry. The usurer's son reappears also, here a combination of the two most persistent traits of that character, gullibility and profligacy. These three plays may be regarded as exemplifications of the simplest form of the plot containing the usurer, his rebellious daughter, and the prodigal, and come logically, if not chronologically, before Haughton's triple complication of it. To take further liberties with the chronological order, Shackerly Marmion's *A Fine Companion*, of 1633, marks the next

stage of development. Here the usurer, Littlegood, has *two* daughters whom he plans to marry to two men of property, one of them Dotario, an old miser. However, Dotario's two needy nephews, Aurelio and a prodigal, Careless, succeed by various stratagems in marrying the two daughters, and not only are they reconciled to the reluctant father-in-law, but Careless receives back his forfeited lands and Aurelio becomes Dotario's avowed heir.

Dotario thus plays a rôle somewhat similar to the senior Plodall in *Wily Beguiled*, in being, if not precisely a usurer, yet an undesirable and avaricious person whose overthrow is as welcomed as the usurer's, especially when he stands in the way of a charming maiden and her needy lover. A still closer adherence to the plot of *Wily Beguiled* is to be found in William Cartwright's *The Ordinary*, of 1634. Here, again, the one usurer has the customary rebellious and attractive daughter, and the other, the almost as frequent foolish son. It is planned that these two shall marry, but the hero, whose father in this case has been undone by the first usurer, tricks the son of the other into marrying the daughter's maid, succeeds, of course, in marrying the daughter himself, and thus, in addition to humiliating both usurers, recovers his ancestral estates. The more frequent disposal of the usurer's son is to marry him off to a courtesan, a fate, indeed, sometimes meted out to the usurer himself. Such is the case in Middleton's well-known *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, of 1606, the first play, I believe, in which two usurers appear. Here the prodigal, Witgood, recovers his mortgages by persuading a usurious uncle, Lucre, into believing that he is about to marry an heiress—in reality his mistress. The other usurer, Hoard, is cozened into marrying the woman, who seems to have deserved a better fate, and Witgood recovers the mortgages from Lucre and marries Hoard's niece.

This play, however, has made use of a device that really should be regarded as part of what may be called the second main usurer plot. This second type appeared first in *Jack Drum's Entertainment*, written probably as early as 1600. Here the usurer, whose "great nose" and some of whose speeches recall Shylock,<sup>22</sup> and whose villainy reminds one less specifically of Barabas, is a bachelor and suitor for the hand of a young heiress. The needy hero appears as her true-love, however, and achieves the two-fold purpose of practically all usurer plays, the confusion of the usurer and the financial salvation of himself, by the eventual marriage of the rich heroine. This second plot is used in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Scornful Lady*, of 1609, with the substitution of "a rich widow" for the young heiress, and with the addition, borrowed from the other type of play, of making the prodigal the usurer's (rather willing) victim. In fact, the amazing final conversion of the usurer Morecraft, against which Dryden protested in his "Essay of Dramatic Poesy," may be evidence of a still further attempt to make use of elements in the older type of plot.<sup>23</sup> A variation of this device for the overthrow of the bachelor or widower usurer forms a sub-plot for Beaumont and Fletcher's *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*, of 1624; it is the main plot of Shirley's *The Wedding*, of 1626, save that the successful lover is here the companion, not the debtor of the usurer; and it plays no small part in Shirley's *The Constant Maid*, of 1636-1639.

In this last play, however, are to be found several variations of older rôles and situations that had by 1636 become

<sup>22</sup> See Simpson's *School of Shakespeare*, vol. II, p. 208.

<sup>23</sup> It has been suggested that Morecraft owes something to Demea of the *Adelphi*. See *Variorum Edition of the Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, edited by R. W. Bond, vol. I, p. 360.

common property. As early as Fletcher and Rowley's *Wit at Several Weapons*, of 1608, the function of the rebellious daughter had been transferred to the equally oppressed and resourceful niece and ward of the usurer. The rich gull, as intended husband, and the poor scholar, as successful lover, reappear in this play nevertheless. The usurious guardian and the elusive ward persist in Jonson's *The Staple of News*, 1625, and in his *The Magnetic Lady*, 1632, in D'Avenant's *The Wits*, of 1634, and in Shirley's omnium gatherum, *The Constant Maid*, of 1636. And the foolish or loathsome intended husband and the successful prodigal, or at least poor lover, are equally persistent.

Ward and niece did not exhaust the possibilities of the rôle of the rebellious daughter. The usurer's wife had been cleverly utilized as far back as 1603 in Middleton's *Michaelmas Term*. Here the young prodigal, Easy, loses his property to the usurer, Quomodo, but as if in return, wins the affections of the usurer's wife. Quomodo, ignorant of this fact, feigns death, to see how his widow and worthless son will bear their loss. The wife promptly marries Easy, and through the gullibility of the son and the chicanery of her husband's traitorous accomplice, is enabled to return Easy's money to him. Just who retains the lady after Quomodo's indignant return to life is not clear. This making a cuckold of the usurer was another much relished punishment. The next year it was employed in *Eastward Hoe*; and in *Westward Hoe*, of 1603 or 1604, the usurer, Tenterhooke, escapes it only by the last-hour faithfulness of his wife, as a reward possibly for his exceptional virtues. He is one of the very few kindly disposed usurers in the drama of the period, and is almost the only decent character in the play in which he appears. The earliest use of this highly popular humiliation of the usurer that I have found is in



Chapman's revolting *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*, 1596. Inasmuch as the bigamous usurer inflicts this punishment upon himself, in his second rôle of Count Hermes, he can scarcely be regarded as having suffered severely. In *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*, of 1613, Middleton introduced a real widow of a usurer to compensate the wife of one of her deceased husband's victims and to marry the customary young prodigal, who is here a needy brother-in-law of the victim.

The wife of an enforced marriage was twice used, first in Beaumont and Fletcher's bewildering play, *The Night Walker or the Little Thief*, of 1614, where as in *The Hog Hath Lost His Pearl*, of the year before, false magic is also employed to bring about the usurer's overthrow and conversion. And to the same ends, his deserted wife is also introduced. An unwilling bride and an illegitimate child were similarly utilized in Richard Brome's *The English Moor, or the Mock Marriage*, of 1636; and the year after *The Night Walker*, in a play called *The Honest Lawyer*, written by an unknown "S. S.," false magic, robbery, a prodigal's deserted wife sought as mistress by the usurer, the revelation of attempted murder, and the usurer's worthy son were all marshaled to save the prodigal and to overwhelm the usurer, Gripe, whose name even is borrowed.<sup>24</sup> A more edifying reformation through the agency of another worthy son is wrought in Thomas May's *The Old Couple*, of 1619. Here the usurer, Earthworm, is publicly credited through the agency of the son with charitable deeds really performed by the son, and is so raised in general esteem thereby that the neighbors come to his aid when his dwelling catches fire. This mark of

<sup>24</sup> Wycherley also gives this name to a usurer. See his *Love in a Word*.

affection touches Earthworm's heart and wins him away from his evil courses.

The device for converting the usurer in the above play is far removed, it must be granted, from the device of the more typical plots, for a worthy son fulfils the functions of the rebellious daughter; and the usurer is not humiliated, gulled, or robbed. And John Cook's *Greene's Tu Quoque, or the City Gallant*, of 1609 to 1612, also departs from the more usual plays, for retribution is as tardy as in Middleton's *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*. In this play compensation is afforded by a nephew who in a sense combines two rôles, that of Middleton's widow and that of the persistent foolish son of the usurer. Staines, a prodigal, has forfeited his property to a usurer, Whirlpit. The usurer dies soon after the beginning of the play and leaves his wealth to his nephew, Bubble, who was at the first Staines's servant. Staines then becomes Bubble's servant and steward and by fraud and by leading Bubble into profligacy secures not only his own forfeited estate but practically all that Bubble has inherited. Thus at the end the characters are returned to their proper status; and the scandal of a gentleman acting as a servant and of a servant posing as a gentleman is saved by the gentleman's dexterous cheating. Another career in this highly immoral play is more conventional and, if possible, more disgraceful. There is a second prodigal, Spendall, who by gambling, debauchery, and silly lavishness runs through the property that has been given him by his former master, a mercer. He is then rescued from the imprisonment he manifestly deserves by the inevitable rich widow.

Before passing to those plays that represent the plagiaristic climax of the usurer drama, it may be of interest to analyze in some detail the elements in one of the most deviously compounded and justly celebrated of all the

plays of the class, Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, first acted sometime before 1626. Sir Giles Overreach, in the magnitude of his extortions, the terribleness of his villainy, his willingness to use his daughter's charms to gain his ends, and his final attempt to kill her, in his seldom failing resourcefulness, his dignity, and in his fearful fate reminds one inevitably of Marlowe's usurious villain, Barabas. His early love for his daughter, and her elopement, on the other hand, go back unmistakably to *The Merchant of Venice*. The usurer's traitorous accomplice, Marrall, had a possible prototype in Ithamore of *The Jew of Malta*, or more possibly in Churms of *Wily Beguiled*. Wellborn, "a Prodigal," who repents his wild ways and promises reform, after his lands have been regained by fraud, had become a familiar character in the usurer play. His "new way to pay old debts," indeed is not so very new, for the trick of making his creditors think he is about to marry "a rich Widow" (who needs no introduction to the readers of this paper) had been utilized by Witgood in Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One* nineteen years before.<sup>25</sup> Overreach's extortionate devices are not unlike those of the usurer, Shafton, in Heywood's *A Woman Killed With Kindness*.<sup>26</sup> And there are even verbal reminiscences of an earlier play.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Massinger has combined these themes, characters, and situations so deftly, has given to his hero-villain so much eloquence and Marlowesque impressiveness, and has

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of Massinger's indebtedness see E. Koepf, *Quellen-Studien*, p. 138. Brander Matthews, however, says "it is not at all unlikely that Massinger may have owed nothing to Middleton's play" (C. M. Gayley's *Representative English Comedies*, vol. III, p. 316).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. III, i, 58 of the latter play with II, i, 2-48 of Massinger's.

<sup>27</sup> Cf.

. . . and when mine ears are pierced with widows' cries,  
And undone orphans wash with tears my threshold,

written all in such adequate verse that he must be given credit for having written not only an original but a thoroughly fine play.

We have seen the growth and the almost endless ramification of two fairly distinct usurer plots, that is, devices for overthrowing and humiliating the usurer; the introduction of a rebellious daughter who characteristically elopes with her father's prodigal debtor, and the introduction of an heiress, maiden or rich widow, in the pursuit of whose hand and fortune the usurer is ignominiously defeated, ordinarily by one of his young prodigal victims. The last logical step in the evolution of the usurer plots was, of course, the combining of these two devices into one plot. Several of the plays already described have in one way or other come close to effecting the inevitable union, but so far as I can discover, the first to do so completely was Rowley (and Middleton's) *A Match at Midnight*, "revised" in 1623.

In this play the crafty and repellent usurer, Bloodhound, has a daughter, Moll, whom he intends to bestow as a reward upon his loathsome accomplice, Earlock, a scrivener. Moll, however, elopes in due course and, as a culminating bit of poetic justice, carries off the mortgage on her lover's property. And, in addition, Bloodhound loses the ubiquitous "rich widow." Other old familiar faces appear. There is the usurer's foolish son who meets the approved fate of marriage to a trull. And the profligate son appears, too, but his rôle is given a somewhat original turn. He, of course, woos, and for a time seems to win

(*New Way to Pay Old Debts*, iv, i, 127-128) and

You lothe the widow's or the orphans tears  
Should wash your pavements, or their piteous cries  
Ring in your roofs.

(Jonson's *Volpone*, i, i, 50-52).

the widow his father is courting, but when the "widow's" husband unexpectedly appears,—shade of *Quomodo* in *Michaelmas Term*—the prodigal repents and reforms without his accustomed reward.

This ingenious compilation was not long denied the flattery of imitation. In 1625, Shirley hit upon it for the framework of his *Love Tricks*, but not without notable contributions of his own. The usurer, Rufaldo, has an even more humiliating love venture, and, incredible as it may seem, the young prodigal who carries off his daughter also plays the rôle of the elusive heiress whom the usurer would wed, and thus is able in his own person to achieve a double victory over the villain and to give him an unmerciful trouncing besides. This amazing dénouement is thus effected. Rufaldo is betrothed to Selina, who runs away disguised in the clothes of her brother Antonio. He, in love with the usurer's closely watched daughter, Hilaria, gains access to her and to her father's house by donning in turn his sister Selina's clothes, and appearing as the usurer's bride. After the mock wedding, the beating takes place. Antonio and Hilaria are made happy, and we learn that in the meantime Selina has married her true-love Infortunio.

The possibilities of this combination of plots evidently appealed to Shirley, for in *The Constant Maid*, written sometime between 1636 and 1639, he recurred to it, but this time with scarcely so original variations. It is a niece and ward in this play who finally eludes the clutches of her usurious uncle and guardian, Hornet, to marry the young Playfair. Hornet, moreover, loses a rich widow as usual, but under circumstances less ingeniously humiliating and painful than those utilized in the preceding play. One notes with surprise that the rich widow is not bestowed on, possibly, one of Playfair's profligate compan-

ions; Shirley, with unwonted inattention to opportunity and precedent, seems to leave her quite unprovided for at the end of the play. And one misses also the usurer's foolish son with his accustomed bride, or indeed, a profligate son who could have taken care of the widow.

If only these had been there, and a group of sharpers borrowed from Middleton, one or two corrupt serjeants and justices, a rascally lawyer, a broker, a vile scrivener possibly as the daughter's intended husband, and, may be, a starved servant, pale descendant of the famished Launcelot Gobbo, this play could have stood not only as an epitome of three-fourths of the usurer plays of the preceding ninety years, but also as a concluding illustration of the eclectic and synthetic practices of certain Elizabethan compounders of plays.

ARTHUR BIVINS STONEX.